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SUBJECT: PUTIN VISITS FINLAND

Classified By: POLOFF DAVID ALLEN SCHLAEFER FOR REASON 1.4
(B) AND (D)

1. (C) Summary: Ambassador Earle I. Mack met privately with Jarmo Viinanen, Chief of Staff to Finland's President Tarja Halonen, on August 3. Viinanen briefed the Ambassador about Russian President Putin's 2 day visit to Finland for meetings with Halonen. Viinanen said that both sides emphasized Finnish-Russian cooperation and partnership and purposefully stayed away from potential areas of disagreement. Agreement was reached to open a new border crossing and explore additional options to facilitate cross-border traffic; Russia placed importance on all 8 of the border checkpoints being fully operational. Putin did not pressure the Finns about their visa regime. Putin told Halonen that he was particularly angry with and "felt betrayed" by Estonia for inserting negative language into the text of the border agreement, and that Russia was now in no hurry to continue the process. At a press conference, Halonen defended the Estonians and Latvians when Putin criticized their treatment of ethnic Russian minorities. Finally, Putin toured the Turku Science Park and expressed general interest in the facilities.

Short on Substance, Long on Symbolism

2. (C) Viinanen told the Ambassador that Putin's visit was designed to highlight the positive aspects of the Finnish-Russian bilateral relationship. Neither side wished to discuss in detail outstanding issues or areas of disagreement, and this non-confrontational agenda had been agreed upon prior to the trip to avoid any unpleasant surprises. For their part, the Finns were eager to use the visit to downplay any suggestions of tension in the bilateral relationship, highlight Finnish-Russian cooperation, and follow up on Halonen's successful visit to Moscow during the World War II celebrations earlier this year. Viinanen characterized the meetings as friendly and as being "between two equals," and said that Halonen and Putin had a strong personal relationship at this point. Most of the discussions took place at Kultaranta ("Gold Beach"), the President's official summer residence on the coast near Turku. Halonen and Putin also took a private (with 2 interpreters only), one-hour evening cruise.

Bilateral Border Issues

3. (C) Viinanen said that both Halonen and Putin pointedly stayed away from likely irritants. Specific agreement to open a new border crossing to facilitate commercial and other traffic was reached, as was general agreement on the need for expedited rail and bus routes. Putin said that it was important for all 8 existing border checkpoints to be open and fully operational. Finnish and Russian officials will schedule a follow-up meeting to explore options. Viinanen said that the often contentious issue of visa policy was mentioned only in passing, and that Putin did not pressure Halonen about Finland's refusal rate or processing requirements. Halonen, for her part, remarked that Finland had a very flexible visa regime, and that it was much easier for a Russian to get a visa to visit Finland than it was for a Finn to obtain a visa to visit Russia. Putin invited Halonen to visit the opening of a wastewater purification plant in September in St. Petersburg, and Halonen said that she would most likely do so.

Baltic Border Issues

4. (C) The Finnish media reported that Halonen strongly defended the Baltic countries to Putin against charges that they mistreated their ethnic Russian minorities. However, Viinanen said that the "occasion to criticize the Balts" on the minorities issue never came up in Putin's discussions with Halonen, and that it was only in response to a reporter's question at the final press conference that Putin made such critical remarks, prompting Halonen to come to the Baltic countries' defense. On the general issue of the Estonian and Latvian border agreements, Putin told Halonen that he was angered by the Estonian Parliament's "betrayal" of his hard work. Putin told Halonen that he had personally

decided to sign the agreements and push them through the ratification process-- in the face of strong domestic opposition-- before the Estonians had made their unhelpful changes to their agreement's preamble. He said that he privately understood the political dynamic that compelled them to do so, but that this did not change his opinion or "alter the reality of the situation." Putin opined to Halonen that the Latvians were "more honest" about the agreements, and in general he seemed to have a more positive assessment of the dialogue with Latvia than with Estonia. However, he said that Russia would wait before concluding any agreements at this point.

S and T, and English

15. (C) Putin toured the Turku Science Park with Finnish officials and, according to Viinanen, "looked around with interest." There were no Russian S and T officials with him, however, and he did not indicate particular interest in any specific project or ask to visit any of the Russian companies in the area. Contrary to some media reports, he did not do any sightseeing other than the boat cruise with Halonen and the stay at the historic Kultaranta. His wife did not accompany him. Putin and Halonen apparently used translators during their discussions, but Viinanen told the Ambassador that Putin spoke some English with Dr. Pentti Arajärvi (Halonen's husband) for about one hour while the two took a sauna together on the first night of the visit. Arajärvi reported that Putin's English was not strong, but that he was obviously working hard on it, and that they were able to communicate satisfactorily.

16. (C) Comment: For a two day visit that included 8 hours of discussion, the meetings-- at least according to Viinanen-- appear to have been remarkably unsubstantive. Journalists raised some difficult issues at the press conference, but troublesome areas such as regional environmental degradation, Russian overflight of Finnish territory, transnational problems like TIP, etc., seem to have been lightly touched on, if at all. Putin was appreciative of Halonen's decision to attend the VE Day celebrations in Moscow and her public remarks at the time, and it seems the current visit may have been designed to reciprocate. Halonen's foreign policy acumen has been questioned recently, as has the state of Finnish-Russian bilateral relations; with next January's election looming, Putin's visit afforded the President an opportunity to share the stage with a major world leader and reassure Finns that all is well on her watch with Finland's most important, difficult, and dangerous neighbor.

MACK